



Cohabitation in a Time of Emergency: 'During' Versus 'After' the Confinement

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Abstract. During the first confinement, imposed as a response to the health emergency, we lived on our albeit minimal balconies looking for sunlight, and we explored our buildings in search of community terraces or underused practicable roofs that gave us fresh air as well as a minimum of socialisation. Then, we wondered whether in the 'after', those spaces would have another (new) value. By extending the reflection to urban public spaces, we note that several cities belonging to 'developed countries' awake from the first confinement with the manifested intention of taking care of their inhabitants. Guided by the definitions of phases of collective human response to a major crisis, given by psychologists, we will analyse some expectations and actions until now implemented in cities. This paper is an invitation to broaden the collective imagination of urban public space, to continue to design it by using emergency periods as a testing ground.

Keywords: Urban cohabitation · Open public space · Taking action

1 Introduction: Waves

Experts warn us that, due to the pandemic health emergency, as individuals and as a community, we are subject to psychological shock. Crises (major disasters or pandemics) arouse collective emotions and people tend to go through certain stages together. To investigate the behaviours that we collectively live and to provide post-disaster mental health services to societies and organizations affected by a major crisis, psychologists state that both community and individual responses to a disaster tend to progress according to phases, represented graphically by curves (periods of high and low spirits) [1].

With the focus on how 'survivors' and the overall community respond to disaster and with a macro view of interacting factors that shape the collective response variation – human causation, probability of recurrence, among others – clinical psychologist Deborah DeWolfe describes a sequence consisting of: Warning or Threat Phase; Impact Phase; Rescue or Heroic Phase; Remedy or Honeymoon Phase; Inventory Phase; Disillusionment Phase, and Reconstruction or Recovery Phase [1].

In DeWolfe's Manual, highly referenced during this pandemic we grapple with, we find the idea of a wave (or waves/ups and downs) and its graphic representation (a

curve) that are a vivid presence in the imagination of our ‘pandemic routine’. Media tell us about the first, the second and the third (so far) contagion curves, the waves of the epidemic infections. A wave reminds us of the force of nature, a danger which will be followed by a recovery.

As if we adapted and moved the in-response-to-disaster changes in human moods, described by psychologists, to the reflection on the city and its project, and bearing in mind that the periods of the pandemic are dilated compared to those of a natural disaster, this paper will use some of the phases’ definitions suggested by DeWolfe.

The aim is to highlight that we are still in the moment of reflecting and planning the ‘during’ in such a way that it can become a testing ground and experimentation for the ‘after/post’ pandemic time. We firmly believe that it is now (‘during’) – a period of time that lasted for more than one year – the time to take action also in the city project. The ‘during’ can be the most fruitful time, as a period of testing and attempting, without it being necessary that the realised urban interventions are fixed and definitive.

With these premises, we ask: how do these collective response variations to the health emergency affect the reflection on the city and its project? In living the city day after day, what are the needs that emerge and what are the answers that the city government takes the opportunity to put into practice?

A first answer leads us to say: between the ups and downs, something has been done, something will last, and more so, we should seize the opportunity to claim and realise.

2 ‘Impact Phase’ + ‘Rescue or Heroic Phase’: Everything Will Be Fine

Following the suggestions of the above-mentioned Manual, during the ‘Rescue or Heroic Phase’ – which, in the case of COVID-19 pandemic coexists with the dilated ‘Impact Phase’ – survival and promoting safety are priorities. We learn that, for some, ‘post-impact disorientation gives way to adrenaline induced rescue behaviour’ ([1], p. 10) and ‘altruism is prominent among both survivors and emergency responders’ ([1], p. 11).

In this phase, we feel a collective need to identify heroes to rescue us from troubles. As a community, we express a common cry: ‘everything will be fine’, and we manifest support for healthcare personnel and people at the forefront dealing with the emergency and guaranteeing daily subsistence. Regarding the thinking and the project of the city, scholars, associations, and researchers raise a common call against many harmful consequences of human action on earth, hoping for repentance (and recovery) on all fronts. Altruism and optimism push us to stick up for cities attentive to topics such as: gender equality, ecological sensibility and biodiversity, sustainable mobility and energy transition, access to housing, and enhancement of proximity production and exchange, among others.

As architects and urban planners, we feel full of expectation to deal with crucial urban issues of pre-pandemic cities. We flank public bodies entrusted with the city’s management and governance in promoting initiatives that touch on two main issues that had become the worries of pre-pandemic city life: (I) the access to

housing/regulation of short-term rental and (II) the decrease of urban driveway space for the benefit of pedestrians and soft mobility/extension of green public spaces.

(I) The first confinement in 2020 gave cities the opportunity to reshape their approach to the housing crisis. For the first time in years, Europe's hottest property markets and the tourism industry experience the absence of tourists. The huge losses in this sector and the need to give other use to buildings, previously only dedicated to welcoming tourists, lead cities to rethink short-term rentals and push hotel owners to differentiate the offer of accommodations.

By taking advantage of the absence of tourists, municipalities intervene in the regulation of short-term rentals. Already from May/June 2020, some cities ban vacation rentals in their central town (Amsterdam) or strike agreements with local universities to rent tourist flats to students (Venice). In England and Wales, after the government issued an 'everyone in' directive for councils to stop the spread of the disease, a big number of rough sleepers have been moved into hotels [2]. In addition, the local government promises to make homes to prevent rough sleepers, housed in emergency pandemic accommodation, from returning to the streets [3] (Fig. 1).

(II) By passing the usual long times of urban planning and often in line with the suggestions of the so-called 'Tactical Urbanism' [4], 'Temporary Urbanism'/public 'policy strategy on temporariness'¹, and 'Open Urbanism' – towards an 'Open City', as argued by Richard Sennett –, some cities amaze us by realising, in a very short time and taking advantage of confinement restrictions, fast interventions with a huge impact on urban mobility and city liveability. Here, temporary uses in public space are often intended as a way to revitalise and unlock a given space's latent potentialities [5].

As claimed in the manifesto 'Challenges, conflicts and opportunities for the City in times of COVID 19' [6] the public space seems to be able to become a catalyst for an improved urban cohabitation. In this line, during the maximum health emergency period and soon after, several cities take the opportunity to implement, experiment and test interventions planned for some time before – 'Open Squares' in Milan; examples of Parklets in Rotterdam and Paris; 'The Street is yours' in Lisbon; 'Superblocks' in Barcelona.

In addition, some cities temporarily adapt public spaces, usually intended for car circulation, for pedestrians by creating ad-hoc routes for the first phases of the confinement exit process – 'Safe Routes' in Barcelona [7]. Here, the use of bright colours on the asphalt (dictated from Tactical Urbanism) and explanatory signage highlight new uses for already existing public spaces. Both of them increase the perception of safety for pedestrians and cyclists (Fig. 2).

Nature is not confined! Because of the restrictions of inhabitant's mobility and the lack of maintenance, the urban green spaces grow and flourish, suggesting a revenge of nature (of vegetation) over urbanisation – the 'feral city'. The amazement and the charm are such that the bodies entrusted with the urban green maintenance question the possibility of leaving some of these green spaces free to grow. In Barcelona, the vegetation left free to grow, and sometimes to take over the asphalt, the greater

¹ See [5]. The article approaches the definitions (and typologies) of 'Temporary Urbanism' as a practice and/or policy strategy on temporariness.



Fig. 1. ‘Closed hotel/shelter for rough sleepers’, Gran Via de les Corts Catalanes, May 2020, Barcelona (Spain). Source: author.



Fig. 2. ‘Safe Routes’ (‘Itineraris segurs’): Via Laietana (*left*); Carrer Consell de Cent (*right*), May 2020, Barcelona (Spain). Source: author.

presence of pollinating insects that have favoured the flowering process together with the presence of bird’s nests push the City Council to require citizens to respect plants and nests as they are [8] (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. ‘Wild Balmes and wild Gran Via’, Carrer de Balmes (*left*); Gran Via de les Corts Catalanes (*right*), May 2020, Barcelona (Spain). Source: author.

3 ‘Remedy or Honeymoon Phase’: The New Normal

During the ‘Impact Phase’ and ‘Rescue or Heroic Phase’ we have gotten used to hearing the phrase ‘new normal’. The phrase, as a kind of euphemism employed by central governments in referring to the immediate post-health emergency future, is a recurring expression that alludes to and hopes for a better future that would be visible to all. The ‘new normal reality’ is, first of all, perceived in heavily urbanised/densely populated areas, that is, in cities or conurbations.

During the weeks to months following the first confinement (the ‘disaster’ in the quoted Manual) we learn that ‘Community bonding occurs as a result of sharing the catastrophic experience and the giving and receiving of community support. Survivors may experience a short lived sense of optimism that the help they will receive will make them whole again’ ([1], p. 11).

Immediately after the first confinement, even if frightened by the delicate economic situation, Europeans do not give up summer holidays. More often than in the past, people choose destinations within the national borders and explore, perhaps for the first time in years, next-door surroundings. They take the opportunity to discover and visit cities, where they have perhaps always lived. It is clear that something has changed in the day-after-day of some cities, and something has been implemented to improve urban cohabitation; from dealing with access to the housing and tourism phenomena to the reduction of public space, which before was the exclusive domain of cars.

Some cities have rolled out legislation aimed at better regulating tourist flats or at obliging rental operators to register with the city. Some actions are aimed at allowing administrations to enforce a bylaw restricting short-term rentals to principal residences. In other cases – mostly where property markets and tourism industry played a key role in ushering in urban renewal and lifting the city out of financial crisis (such as in Portugal [9]) – the confinement restrictions give the opportunity to reshape the approach to the housing crisis.

In this line, we find the initiative ‘Porto with Meaning’ [10] – for the rental of affordable flats–, and the intent to convert some of Lisbon’s tourist flats into affordable houses, by offering of renting landlords’ properties to the city for a minimum of five years, at a fixed price, with tax benefits and possibility of prepayment of rents – ‘Safe Income Program’ [11]. In addition, some hotel accommodations have been converted into monthly rentals – also purchased to house some of the city’s most vulnerable people – and warnings have been issued to landlords whose houses have been vacant for more than two years (in Barcelona).

On the public space front, the most usual intervention materialises in more room for pedestrian and soft mobility, and, later, in more room dedicated in boosting consumption for those commercial activities affected by the health restrictions. Firstly, after the first confinement during which we had observed our ‘ghost towns’ from the window, we experienced our cities largely pedestrianised or transformed into ‘zone at 20 km/h’ (Brussels) or ‘City of 15 min’ (Paris). Later, we enjoyed urban surfaces, which before were intended for car circulation or parking lots, together with vacant and underused open-air spaces with a new-acquired (sometimes temporary) use.

To compensate for the losses due to capacity reduction, several variants of ‘parklets’ (sidewalk extensions installed on parking lanes), increase the open-air space of bars and restaurants, whose activity is limited by the health emergency restrictions. Leisure and cultural activities, heavily penalised by the pandemic, sometimes find their extra-room in the enlarged open public space rescued from car circulation. At times, festivals, large event or drive-in find a place in urban or peri-urban underused and vacant spaces [12] (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. ‘Parklets adapted for bar services’ (left); December 2020, Barcelona (Spain). ‘Pedestrianisation and more space for bar and restaurants services’ (right) - *A rua é sua*, October 2020, Lisbon (Portugal). Source: author.

4 ‘Inventory Phase’ + ‘Disillusionment Phase’: Finals Considerations

As suggested by the Manual [1], we learn that: ‘Over time, survivors begin to recognize the limits of available disaster assistance’ and ‘The unrealistic optimism initially experienced can give way to discouragement and fatigue’ ([1], p. 11). DeWolfe warns us that the ‘Inventory Phase’ will be followed by a ‘Disillusionment Phase’ where ‘The larger community less impacted by the disaster has often returned to business as usual, which is typically discouraging and alienating for survivors.(...) Divisiveness and hostility among neighbours undermine community cohesion and support’ ([1], p. 12).

Guided by the warnings of specialists, this paper has retraced the actions that, starting from the pandemic outbreak, should lead us to an improved urban cohabitation. In response to the questions posed in the introduction, we point out old (and new) urban needs, and answers that the city government takes the opportunity to put into practice on urban public spaces.

Although the focus of the paper is the action on urban public space, we advocate monitoring and regulation – by limiting the voluntary adhesion of private individuals in public policies on short-term rental front [13] – for all processes of urban policy. Furthermore, regarding the design of the urban public space, we note that something has been done – also towards a public awareness (I) –, something will last, and more so, we should seize the chance to claim and realise (II).

(I) *The first confinement and its exit process proved to be a testing time for rethinking urban public space.*

_These times certainly impelled public policies to implement actions aimed at the ‘good of the city and its people’ but, above all, they *triggered a change in the expectations of the inhabitants*, to what from now on cannot be theirs. On one hand, pedestrians and cyclists are more aware of their right to public space; on the other hand, drivers, taxis and some traders are on a war footing against pedestrianisation.

_In areas that before were exclusively for cars, the perception of pedestrian and bicycle safety has been heightened; consequently, the practice of outdoors socialisation has increased. The improved soft mobility flows, also due to incentives for the purchase of bicycles and electric motorcycles, led to a more public awareness of *public space (also paved/asphalted) as a space for all*. Nevertheless, the car –the safest means of transport during infectious diseases emergency – and, with the resumption of urban activities, the charging and discharging (*logistic*) areas, *are reaffirmed as weaknesses of the compact city*.

_It is now a shared opinion that *the streets that are least valued by the inhabitants are located mainly in logistics areas, with high vehicle traffic as well as little presence of vegetation* (see a recent experiment [14]).

_In urban public spaces where an add-on strategy (more/differentiated uses) has been put in place, the latter was often accompanied by *communication*– explaining what is done and for whose benefit. As a result, fast changes in urban spaces, especially in terms of car circulation, become luck and misfortune of some European mayors (i.e., in Paris and Barcelona).

_Interventions tested in urban public spaces as a way to overcome the health restriction phases, teach and can become a *guide to vacant open spaces, not necessarily public*, waiting for destination.

_Some ‘Safe Routes’–won against car circulation for the benefit of the pedestrian, during the confinement–give way to *definitive change in urban mobility*, such as a reduced section of some roads through which cities can be speedily crossed [15].

(II) *By claiming and reaffirming urban coexistence/cohabitation policies that look at a mixture of uses and users as the founders of the city*, we should bear in mind some crucial points.

_Tactical or add-on strategies in public spaces should not exempt from *monitoring activities that gradually arise in the surroundings of the intervened areas*. To avoid gentrification/touristification and traffic congestion in nearby areas, the regulation of subsequent activities may be necessary.

_Interventions have to *take into consideration the whole conurbation* with special attention on urbanised areas with well-known problems of poor liveability, where we often find large vacant areas.

_In rethinking the supply logistics, we *should not lose all the public space won against cars* and given to restaurants and bars (for example). Following the recent ‘European Biodiversity Strategy for 2030’ entitled ‘Bringing nature back into our lives’ we should give more room to vegetation. This is to say, in urban spaces: not flower pots but green areas/from mineral to planted areas.

Even though specialists remind us that periods of high health emergency could be recurring, the cited Manual [1] suggests a last phase (or what expect us in the after-pandemic future): the ‘Reconstruction or Recovery Phase’. From it we learn that: ‘When people come to see meaning, personal growth, and opportunity from their disaster experience despite their losses and pain, they are well on the road to recovery ([1], p. 12).

In a previous contribution, for times when health emergency restrictions impose a confinement, we suggested to enlarge the domestic spaces beyond the walls of our houses [16]. Here, knowing how much open-air activities and lack of socialisation can be counterproductive to our well-being, we call for an ‘activation of public space’. This goes beyond a mere flexibility of use and invites a progressive removal of asphalt surfaces. It also invites us to make the city a test of a (also temporary) nursery for vegetation adapted to (and characteristic of) urban environments. Cities attractive again, even in times of pandemics.

Funding. This research was funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia – FCT) — ‘Orçamento de Estado do Ministério da Ciência, Tecnologia e Ensino Superior’ — and the European Commission / European Social Fund (ESF) — ‘ao abrigo do Quadro Estratégico Comum (2014-2020), através, nomeadamente, do Programa Operacional do Capital Humano’, under the Postdoctoral Research Fellowship, individual postdoctoral grant (SFRH/BPD/116331/2016), carried out at CIAUD (URBinLAB); Lisbon School of Architecture; Universidade de Lisboa, Lisbon (Portugal).

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